TRIAL BEGINS OF 2 ACCUSED OF MURDERING LAOTIAN MAN

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A Laotian refugee, who survived a long war in his own country and a year in a camp in Thailand, probably lost his life on a Seattle street because he owned no refrigerator, a deputy King County prosecutor contends

``He basically died because (he was) going after ice,'' Deputy Prosecutor Alfred Matthews said yesterday during his opening statement to jurors who will deliberate evidence in the killing of Nai Vang Saeturn, 36.

``He worked hard for his money, he was a janitor. He chose not to give them (his money). . . . They cut his throat,'' Matthews said.

Alvin Paul Mitchell, 20, and Gerald Salvino Hankerson, 18, are being tried before King County Superior Court Judge Jerome Johnson and a jury of eight women and four men.

They are charged with aggravated first-degree murder, the most serious charge in state law. Prosecutors have said they would not seek the death penalty, and the only other possible sentence would be life imprisonment without parole.

Saeturn was found, bleeding profusely from knife wounds, about 11:30 p.m. May 18, 1987, in a driveway near Garfield High School. He died early the next day at Harborview Medical Center.

Matthews said two men demanded money from Saeturn as he was returning home from a neighborhood store. His throat was slashed but he managed to flee about 50 feet before the two jumped him and stabbed him 10 times, the prosecutor said.

In his opening statement, the deputy prosecutor portrayed Saeturn as a peaceful man driven by war from Southeast Asia.

Saeturn came to the United States in 1980 with his family, members of the minority Mien group in Laos. Members of the Christian Mien community in Seattle hoped he could become the first minister in their church, and hoped to raise money to send him to religion classes.

Matthews said that, on the night he was stabbed, Saeturn was expecting a visit from someone who had befriended him earlier in the day. Wanting to have refreshments on hand, he went to a nearby store for soft drinks.

However, the deputy prosecutor said, the store the victim normally patronized _ just two blocks from his apartment _ did not sell ice, so Saeturn went to another store two blocks farther away.

The attackers were at the store and saw Saeturn pay for the soft drinks and ice, then followed him when he left, Matthews said.

Defense attorneys declined to present opening statements yesterday, but contend their clients are innocent.

Anthony Savage, representing Hankerson, said outside the courtroom he did not want to give the prosecution a preview of the defense case.

Robert Leen, representing Mitchell, said the state's case relies heavily on witnesses with criminal involvement who have been given immunity in the Saeturn case in return for their testimony.

Both said they had not decided whether their clients would testify.

Matthews acknowledged that some of his witnesses have had brushes with the law. He told jurors that two of the witnesses, friends of Saeturn's, saw the killing. But, instead of seeking help, one of the pair drank a soft drink the victim had dropped and both retrieved money he lost during the struggle with his attackers.

The witnesses were afraid they had committed a crime and did not come forward at first, Matthews said. Ultimately they were given immunity from prosecution in the case.

``I'm not going to tell you these are anything but rough street kids but, unfortunately, the type of person who would have helped Nai Vang Saeturn wasn't in the street that night,'' Matthews said.

Mitchell and Hankerson were not arrested until December. Before that Mitchell claimed to be a witness to the killing. Police have said he provided them with false leads in the case, slowing the investigation.

That could prove to be a sticking point in the case, because Mitchell initially made statements implicating others in the crime but also made statements implicating himself and Hankerson.

``One of these men . . . couldn't keep this wonderful secret to himself. He told a friend what he had done,'' Matthews said.

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